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AUTHOR Clark, David
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ABSTRACT

Any attempts to improve excellence and equity in our schools must be predicated on the self-confident assumption that our schools can make a critical difference in the lives of children and young adults. Four propositions are offered as to what we know about school improvement: (1) public schools, individual classrooms, and school systems can and do improve. The factors that facilitate improvement are not so exotic, unusual, or expensive that they are beyond the grasp of leaders in ordinary situations; (2) teachers will respond to administrative assistance and support in implementing school improvement programs; (3) an innovation is more likely to be adopted if it is perceived as having relative advantage, compatibility, simplicity, and legitimacy; and (4) specific resources (staff development and monetary support) are necessary for effective school improvement programs. Seven characteristics of effective organizations that are also characteristic of effective schools are identified: (1) commitment, (2) expectations, (3) action, (4) leadership, (5) focus, (6) climate, and (7) slack. (TE)

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STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMS

David Clark
Professor of Education
Indiana University

I want to change the focus from the teaching research that's been reported to you over the last 24 hours and talk about some of the things we know about effective school improvement programs. But first I too want to reflect on the peculiar situation we find ourselves in at the present time. Americans must be both the most self-assured and confident and the most unsure and insecure people on the face of the earth. After we've experienced decades of industrial and economic success and virtual unchallenged theoretical and practical leadership in the art and science of management, the emergence of an effective international challenge set off shock waves of uncertainty and despair about our ability to manage our businesses and industries and compete in multi-national markets.

Happily for us before we were submerged by Theory Z and quality circles and simply turned over our industrial enterprise to the Japanese, two thoughtful business consultants wrote a best seller observing that American companies with exemplary records of success in the marketplace still existed. They rediscovered some of the elements of genius in America's business and industrial complex and produced a revival of confidence in American business and industry. Later in this talk I will comment more on their findings as they apply to schools and school systems.

The reports that are being issued about education argue that the ability of educationists in the 1980s to respond to what we know makes a difference in schools will be insufficient. That is, we can't do the job. It's not that we don't know how to do the job, or that we don't have the information to do the job. The reports portray American schools as organizations that have failed. That contention is not true. American schools have not failed. The reason for talking about it is not to be defensive or argumentative. It is to create the conditions necessary for organizational change. You are the individuals responsible for managing schools and providing leadership in schools. If you do not have a sense of efficacy about your past efforts, your current efforts and your future potential efforts, you have no more chance of succeeding at your task than students in the classroom who consistently receive negative reinforcement on learning tasks. If you don't believe you can change your schools and your school district, if in fact the assertions of A Nation at Risk are true, if that report correctly portrays the condition of American education, our situation would be hopeless because it is a charge against the persons who are currently managing our schools. Fortunately it's not true. A Nation at Risk

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intentionally engaged in hyperbole to make the points that the authors thought were important to bring to our attention.

The challenges that confront American education are numerous, and the demands are going to continue. We need to seek out and implement programs and strategies that will improve excellence and equity. But we have to do that confident of two assumptions: one is that what we do in schools makes a critical difference to the lives of children and young adults, and secondly that what American schools do to affect the lives of children and young adults is the best in the world. We have to have a sense of efficacy.

What Do We Know About School Improvement?

Research on educational change has clarified and specified some of the ingredients necessary for school improvement. As with the effective school, effective school improvement programs are probably best represented as a "syndrome" or "culture" of mutually reinforcing expectations and activities. For the purpose of bringing together the research findings of the school improvement literature, let me offer a set of propositions--statements for discussion.

Proposition 1 - Public schools, individual classrooms, and school systems can and do improve and the factors facilitating school improvement are neither so exotic, unusual, or expensive that they are beyond the grasp of extraordinary leaders in ordinary situations.

The record of success of school improvement programs whether they are local school improvement programs, state school improvement programs, or federal school improvement programs is very good. The federal initiatives worked very well in terms of the amount of money that was put into them over the past 15 or 20 years. One of the myths being perpetrated is that the evaluations of these programs were negative, and that's incorrect. The evaluations of the programs were almost uniformly positive.

Proposition 2 - People matter most in school improvement programs:

(a) Teachers can and will implement new practices and programs given active leadership from building and central office administrators, a chance for planning the implementation process, appropriate training, opportunities for interaction, breathing space to try and fail, and continuous assistance and support.

There are probably no professionals in all human existence that receive as little positive feedback from other adults as classroom teachers. And during a period of school improvement it is terribly important that they be provided with that positive feedback from other adults.

(b) Building level administrators make a difference in school improvement programs by establishing a climate of expectations that teachers will successfully improve practice and by providing on-site coordination, communication, assistance, and support.

(c) District level administrators affect school improvement programs by exhibiting active support in the form of communicated expectations for success, psychological support, needed resources, and local facilitation assistance.

I can tell the district level administrator something about the nature of that support as viewed by teachers. Teachers suspect the district level administrators will provide support during the adoption stage and then they'll stop. As soon as they've convinced enough school people to start working on a project, they'll lose interest in it and they'll be off on something else. And what teachers look for in these school improvement projects is whether 6 months after the project has started, the superintendent or representatives of the superintendent's staff are still around when the implementation problems start to bear down on individual classrooms and individual schools.

(d) External assisters are most effective at the school level providing concrete and practical assistance on implementation issues, i.e., planning, scheduling, problem-solving, follow-through.

Proposition 3 - An innovation is more likely to be adopted and implemented if it is perceived as having relative advantage, compatibility, simplicity, and legitimacy. Implementation is more effective when the innovation focuses on a specific need and demonstrates clarity in purpose and techniques.

Proposition 4 - Specific resources are necessary to support effective school improvement programs:

(a) Staff development programs that are task-specific, and provide on-going, continuous assistance and support.

(b) Monetary resources that are adequate to provide the people and time needed in the program.

The notion that these programs can proceed without external assistance is belied by all the presentations that have been made here. Monetary resources are frequently needed to provide people and time needed in the early stages of the innovation when, for example, teachers need to talk to one another.

Lessons From America's Best Run Schools

Let me turn to a broader literature. Many people at the present time are concerned with the nature of effective organizations. Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman unleashed a blockbuster best seller this year on America's best-run companies, In Search of Excellence. The book is an articulate and relaxed summary of what the authors learned by visiting 35-40 successful companies, serving as consultants for many years to both successful and unsuccessful firms, and reviewing rather carefully contemporary theory and thought about organizations. They began their presentation by noting and commenting very briefly on attributes they asserted characterized excellent companies.

I want to close by noting seven characteristics of effective organizations that I think are also characteristics of effective schools.

1. Commitment. Good schools project a raison d'etre. The school's mission that is asserted by individual staff members may seem imprecise but collectively the staff has arrived at an agreed upon set of behaviors and outcomes that are sufficiently specific to acculturate new organizational members and control the behavior of veteran members. They are organizations with a sense of themselves.

2. Expectations. Good schools and school systems are populated by confident people who expect others to perform to their personal level of quality. The attitude of success crosses categories and feeds on itself. Teachers expect students to achieve. Students know they are expected to achieve and they expect, in turn, to have involved, competent teachers. Principals are surprised by teachers who fail. Teachers are surprised by administrators who ask little of themselves and others.

3. Action. People in good schools do things. They have a bias for action, a proclivity for success, and a sense of opportunism. They plan for now; seize decision options when they arise; try new ideas; drop bad trials; and play within their strengths. Good school systems and schools have learned how to avoid talking new ideas to death. Critics of the

Instructionally Effective Schools (IES) movement pointed to its vague internal structure. Good schools invented a structure and improved their practice. The alternative public schools movement of the late 70s flourished and succeeded because educators in those sites preferred to try new possibilities for success rather than live with old possibilities that had failed.

4. Leadership. The IES literature hammered at the role of the principal as a key factor in school effectiveness. The School Improvement (SI) research singled out the chief school administrator as the key to adoption and her/his staff as critical internal assisters. They are probably both right and incomplete. Peters and Waterman pressed the point that, "innovative companies foster many leaders and many innovators throughout the organization." People with high levels of efficacy and expectancy who are trying and experimenting cannot be restricted to designated leadership positions. Effective educational organizations spawn primary work groups and individual "champions" in unusual numbers. The designated leaderships create an environment for trial and a tolerance for failure so that leaders can emerge and be sustained at all levels of the school system.

5. Focus. Good schools pay attention to the task at hand. Student achievement in the classroom commands the attention of teachers and administrators. More classroom time is allotted to academic learning; more of the allotted time is engaged academic learning time for students. Staff development programs concentrate on classroom-oriented skills and understandings. Good schools know what their core tasks are and focus on those jobs. Like successful companies they "stick to the knitting."

6. Climate. At a minimum, good schools maintain an orderly and safe environment for students and teachers. But they are much more than orderly. Time after time observers report that the organizational climate in successful schools is obvious but hard to specify. Firstly, successful schools work for all the people in the building. They are not schools for students; nor are they schools for teachers and administrators. They work for adults and children and adolescents. The SI literature emphasizes that successful innovations have to fit teacher needs. That sounds selfish. One is inclined to say who cares about teachers if it works for students. The point is you can't have one condition without the other. Good schools are good places to live and work, for everybody.

7. Slack. Good schools have a reasonable level of human resources and slack time. In the IES literature this shows up in an increased number of adults to children in the

building. In the SI literature the importance of internal and external assisters is emphasized. Both literatures describe the necessity of time for teachers to participate in staff development activity and incorporate new practices into their already crowded professional lives. Good practice is facilitated by a reasonable level of organizational redundancy and slack at the classroom level. Tolerance for failure, encouragement of experimentation, and the capacity to invent and adapt innovations are not achievable in organizational settings where effectiveness is regularly traded off for efficiency.

Do these attributes strike you as ordinary, even unsurprising? We hope so. Ordinary conditions would appear to be attainable. Most American schools are not excellent, just ordinary. Imagine that they could become ordinarily excellent.